



HE WOMAN IN GRAY

ROBERT ESTES DURAND.

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)
"Don't be a fool, then! You've brought it on yourself!" grated the deep voice of the companion.

I put temptation away from me, and strode, with footsteps purposely made heavy, to the further end of the room. Still, I could not avoid catching an occasional word, so obvious did the speakers, in their evident agitation, seem to be of everything save themselves.

"Do you mean to carry it through, or do you not?" sternly demanded Miss Traill.

"Yes—yes—yes! A thousand times yes! But it must be in my own way. Now will you leave me in peace?"

"Not till you tell me whether or no you found what you went to look for in that old woman's room."

"How do you know I went to look for anything?"

"Because I know you. And I know that there was something there to find."

There was a sudden cessation of all sound below, and the silence was not broken again. With what threats had Miss Traill the power to terrify her lovely mistress? What did the latter mean to "carry through in her own way?" And had Miss Traill referred to mentioning "the old woman's room"—to that strange, dim chamber of murder in the clock tower at the House of Fear?

"Did you hear that big clock striking all the hours and quarters hours last night, sir?" inquired our smooth waiter at the breakfast table.

"Yes, I heard the church clock striking," I returned absently, "until the quarter after 2 had sounded."

"Ah, but, sir, it wasn't the church clock. That's why I took the liberty of mentioning it. Everybody in the village has been talking about it, sir."

"Indeed?" Until he had spoken I had forgotten the sudden traveling of those slim gilded hands over the face of the clock at Lorn Abbey; but now I remembered that the Woman in Gray had found it, and knew what the man was about to say.

"How could it be?" I asked, trying to explain the fact that the clock has suddenly begun to strike?"

"Oh, it's explained in different ways, sir. You see, when Mrs. Haynes was murdered everybody missed the clock, which had always struck every quarter of an hour since the oldest inhabitant could remember. Then it got round among the superstitious old ladies, sir, until everybody'd heard it, and got used to it, that if the clock in the tower should ever be set going again it would be by old Mrs. Haynes' spirit itself, come back to try and tell something which was lying heavy on its mind."

CHAPTER IV.
We did not meet Miss Hope that day. Upon inquiry I learned that she and our strange companion had left the inn early in the morning, bound for no one knew whither.

My uncle looked disappointed when I reported this fact to him. Paula pleaded. We went over the Abbey that forenoon and discussed this and that improvement suggested and necessary.

"I have decided to give the Abbey full and complete attention," declared Sir Wilfrid when we returned to the inn, "and I have also decided to accept an invitation that has been extended for some time."

Paula looked curious. Her satisfaction was apparent as my uncle concluded: "Our dear friends, Sir Thomas and Lady Towers, are at Hazelmont. I shall write to have them expect us for a week at least. In the meantime I will wire my private secretary, Jerome, to join us. You young people can enjoy a delightful outing, while I formulate my plans for the future."

Monday found us all pleasantly domesticated with the most charming hostess and genial host the country afforded. We had always been a harmonious, harmonious people at Hazelmont; and the present was no deviation from the usual occasion. On Wednesday my uncle's factotum and assistant in various literary and artistic researches with which he entertained himself, arrived upon the scene. He and I had never been familiar, scarcely friendly, for I had always disliked and distrusted him. With Paula, however, it was different. She had found Jerome in the past an humble and willing servant, and the fellow was faithful and careful in executing commissions that could not be trusted to a minor menial. I fancied she was more than ordinarily civil and pleasant to him on his arrival, and twice in the day I noticed them in the garden conversing together.

"He has so much to tell me of home and London, you know," she explained to me later, but I cared nothing for the same, for my thoughts were and had constantly been since the preceding Friday—on Miss Hope.

explicit instructions on some theme of deep interest to her mind.

In the afternoon Jerome disappeared. It was late in the evening when I was lying on a divan in a little reading room off from the main drawing room. This apartment opened into a side corridor that went out and down into the garden. It had begun raining about dusk, and the guests had a dismal evening of it, save when relieved from the monotony by Miss Hope's fine singing. I had sought this solitude in something of "a huff."

Miss Hope had been radiant and attentive to Sir Wilfrid, and it seemed to me, markedly evasive of myself. So I had sought solitude to mope, so influenced by the neglect of the young lady that I was glad that Paula did not notice me, as many times during an hour she passed through the reading room and anxiously. I thought, went along the corridor and looked out into the dark, dripping garden as though expecting some one.

I was in the midst of a waking dream, with closed eyes, when abruptly there was a clatter, then a crash, and ringing high above the double commotion, the shrill scream of a woman's voice.

I sprang up from the divan, and with a few quick strides had reached the corridor. There was Jerome and Paula. He had tottered backward, and losing his balance on the slippery and polished floor, had fallen heavily, striking his head with a crashing thud.

The noise of the fall and the cry of alarm from Paula's lips brought every one trooping out from the drawing room. "I met him just coming in, very wet and strange looking," exclaimed Paula innocently.

Even as she spoke Jerome opened his eyes.

"The letter!" he stuttered in a thick, unnatural voice. "Where is—"

"Where is what?" I asked, for I saw that startled him so. Again Paula spoke out sharply.

"Thank you," faltered Jerome. "I—my head is very queer, but I remember—"

"You were outside the house—only a few yards down the avenue. I—I'd been walking fast, and stopped for a minute to take breath. Suddenly I smelt something strange and pungent. It was like the odor in the tiger house at the Zoo more than anything else. I kept still, for I heard something breathing close to me, short and hard, and when I looked round I could see a thing, darker than the darkness, moving close by among the trees at the end of the avenue, and I stared straight into a pair of eyes that glowed like two red-hot coals. I gave a shout, and whether that kept it away from me I can't tell, for I hadn't time to think again before I was inside the house, coming in through that little door at the end of the long passage there which opens on the lawn and slamming it after me."

That's all, except—the letter, Miss Wynne, and I—"

"I don't think poor Mr. Jerome half knows what he is talking about," ejaculated Paula. "You want to be taken to your room, and have cooling bandages put on your head, I'm sure, don't you?"

"Yes—oh, yes. My head is very bad. I have a feeling as though something had snapped—inside."

Forthwith he was assisted to his feet by two stalwart footmen, almost twice his size, and so, supported firmly under each drooping arm, he was borne away in the midst of a little procession.

As they moved him, a folded sheet of paper fluttered from his coat to the floor, and I, being nearest to the spot, stooped and picked it up. So doing, without the slightest intention of reading words not intended for my eyes, part of a sentence, written in a large, bold, clerical hand, seemed suddenly to separate itself from those surrounding it on the page which was uppermost and print itself upon my consciousness: "The woman now passing under the name of Consuelo Hope is—"

My blood leaped with contending emotions: anger against Paula and Jerome, surprise and disgust, as a flood of enlightenment regarding the errand on which the secretary had been sent poured into my mind, and above all an overweening desire to turn the page and read the remainder of the sentence.

"Isn't that the letter which poor Mr. Jerome appeared to be so anxious about?" Paula inquired. "At least, he has dropped it, and as I am going to my own room I will get my maid to leave it at his door."

Without a word I gave her the letter, and hurried away with it. I hesitated momentarily, but, deciding that it would be impossible for me to play the hypocrite, and go to inquire civilly after Jerome's state of health, I slowly followed the others into the pretty music room.

we should otherwise have been. We have continually been expecting to meet you, and allowing ourselves to be disappointed when we didn't. But your disappearance was slightly—er—disconcerting, to say the least."

She laughed. "Ah! I have a dramatic instinct." "You have indeed."

"Why not? But you look as though you would like to lecture me. Let us talk of something else, pray. That escaped tiger, for instance. Who knows but its baleful eyes may be glaring at us through that half-curtained window over there? Ugh!"

"If you give me the choice," I said, "I should much prefer to talk of you—the 'Ladies' and not the 'Tiger.'"

"Do you remember saying last Friday to Sir Wilfrid Amory that perhaps one day I should have a very great favor to ask him? Well, I have asked it tonight—only a few moments ago, in the conservatory. And the scent of the flowers was so friendly and persuasive that unconsciously he was influenced by them, and inclined to say 'Yes.' Last week I—I didn't dream, of course, that I should have an opportunity of asking him so soon. But most things come to one unexpectedly. I have found. Haven't you?"

"Yes—of late," I was drawn to admit in a low voice.

"And Sir Wilfrid was most kind. He has promised that while he is here—while his secretary is unable to work—I shall be allowed to assist him. And then, later, he is thinking, it seems, of giving Mr. Jerome a holiday. If he does so, I am to be secretary pro tem. Now, at all events, I have surprised you."

"You have done nothing else from the first moment I beheld you."

"But now? You are not displeased? It would not vex you, or—Miss Wynne, that Miss Traill and I should be, for a time, guests in your uncle's house, fellow-lodgers with yourselves—for it would, of course, amount to that."

I knew not what to answer, and for a moment I was dumb.

"Please tell me," she said childishly. "I—I can answer for myself that it would be a great delight," I stammered. But even as I spoke I told myself that, with the knowledge of my own heart which this night had given me, it would be impossible for me to remain, day after day, under the same roof with her and—my affianced wife.

"You cannot answer for—Miss Wynne?"

"How could that be possible?"

"I know," Miss Hope went on, with a new meekness, "that she does not like me. It has not been difficult to see that. Why should she like me? And yet, why need she be angry? I should do her and her prospects no harm. I shouldn't interfere with her in any way. You—and she may think that I am not in earnest about really working for Sir Wilfrid. You may think that I don't know how to work, and that my desire is simply to visit in the house of a great man, and become intimate with his family. But I swear to you, Mr. Darkmore, that whatever my motive may be, it is nothing so vulgar, nothing so sordid, as that."

CHAPTER V.
Our next day at Hazelmont passed for me like a troubled dream.

In the morning Paula quarreled with her uncle over the arrangement he and Miss Hope had made for work together. My peace-making attempts were ill received by her, and she delighted in distressing me by vague threats of a forthcoming revenge.

It was intended that on the following morning we should have some shooting. The weather being crisp, with a light frost; and after dinner I, with all the other men, adjourned to the gun room. It was on the ground floor, with a door opening upon the lawn, and another into the hall, close to the foot of a stairway. Half way down these stairs a small window had been cut, which looked into the gun room and lighted the hall, which otherwise would have been rather dark.

The stairs themselves afforded a short cut to the bed rooms above, and were a good deal used by every one in the house; but until this evening—though I had caught glimpses of the interior of the gun room through the window in going up or down—I had not happened to go inside.

I could not call up the enthusiasm for the hunting trophies I might have felt had I owned a lighter heart, for I recalled, with some anxiety, Paula's threat of the morning. "Wait until to-night!" she had said, with intensest malice in voice and eyes. And "to-night" had now arrived. Already it was after 10 o'clock.

At last I made some excuse or returning to the drawing room. As I approached the doorway my heart bounded with a great sense of relief, for I heard the sound of the piano and Miss Hope's rich contralto voice ringing out in the grand strains of "The Erl King." Nothing had happened, then, after all. I waited until the singing had ceased; then I opened the door and went in.

"We were just thinking of joining you all in the gun room," said Paula. "You were really wanted there." Somehow, there seemed a hidden meaning in the way she smilingly spoke the words. "Didn't Miss Edwards sing that song charmingly?" she went on, turning to Lady Towers.

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